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Message from State Conservationist Roylene Rides at the Door

The Secretary of Agriculture, Mike Johanns released USDA's proposal for the 2007 Farm Bill. The process revealed virtually unanimous support for conservation for the next farm bill. The Administration's Farm Bill proposal reflects, supports, and contains the right policy at the right time. Conservation highlights of the proposal include:

- *Propose to increase conservation funding by \$7.8 billion*
- *Consolidate existing cost-share programs, Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program, Agricultural Management Assistance, Forest Land Enhancement Program, Ground & Surface Water Conservation Program, and Klamath Basin Program into a newly designed Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Full funding increase to \$4.2 billion*
- *Streamline working lands easement programs by consolidating Farm & Ranch Lands Protection Program and Grassland Reserve Program into one Private Lands Protection Program and increase funding by about \$900 million*
- *Committed to wetlands, and increase Wetlands Reserve Program, funding by \$2.1 billion and increase the acreage to 3.5 million acres*
- *Modify Conservation Security Program to two tiers instead of three and increase funding by \$500 million*
- *Reauthorize the Conservation Reserve Program with added focus on the most environmentally sensitive areas*
- *Consolidate two emergency response programs, EWP, ECP into a new Emergency Landscape program*
- *Set aside 10 percent of all Farm Bill conservation program spending for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers.*
- *Eliminations of Section 1241 (d) of the 2002 farm bill, the regional equity provision*



The consolidation of programs will eliminate confusion and redundancy. Also, decrease administrative cost, which will allow for more dollars for producers and more environmental benefits. The whole proposal can be found at www.usda.gov.

I hope you enjoy Rhode Island NRCS's activity report. If you have any questions or need further information, please let me know.



ROYLENE RIDES AT THE DOOR
State Conservationist

Field Staff Happenings/State-wide

Upper Narragansett Bay

Pasture Condition Scoring as a Tool to Manage Pasture and Livestock

by Michael Merrill, District Conservationist & Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative Coordinator



Livestock owners who utilize pastureland are important managers of RI's working landscape. NRCS works closely with many producers to help them manage pasture in a sustainable way throughout the state. One of our conservation practices is "*Prescribed Grazing*" in which the landowners work with NRCS and other partners to develop grazing and pasture management plans which allows the landowner to plan for the best use of pastures, keep sensitive resources conserved, and keep the livestock in a healthy condition.

One important tool to evaluate the condition of pastures is the Pasture Condition Score, which landowners and the NRCS staff use. A well-managed pasture is one whose productivity (plant and animal) is optimized while it does no harm to soil, water, and air quality. Pasture condition scoring is a systematic way to check how well a pasture is managed. If the pasture is located on the proper site and well managed, it will have a good to excellent overall pasture condition score. By rating key indicators and causative factors common to all pastures, pasture condition can be evaluated and the primary reasons for a low condition score identified. Conditions that typically express themselves as pasture resource concerns are poor plant growth, weedy species invasion, poor animal performance, visible soil loss, increased runoff, and impaired water quality.

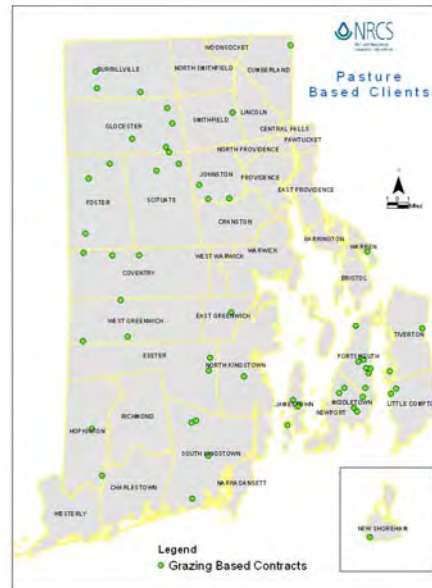
Pasture condition scoring, to be most useful, should occur several times a year during key critical management periods throughout the grazing season. Scoring should be performed:

- At peak forage supply periods
- At the start before placing livestock on pasture
- At low forage supply periods
- As plant stress appears
- Near the end to help decide when to remove livestock

In addition, pastures used for year-round grazing benefit from pasture condition scoring:

- Going into the winter season
- Late in winter
- During thaws or wet periods

Pasture condition scoring can be useful in deciding when to move livestock or planning other management actions. It sorts out which improvements are most likely to improve pasture condition or livestock performance. Pasture condition scoring involves the visual evaluation of 10 indicators, listed and described below, which rate pasture condition. In the *Pasture Condition Score Sheet*, each indicator or factor has five conditions described for it, ranging from very poor to excellent. This objectively ranks the extent of any problem(s) and helps sort out the likely cause(s). Evaluate each indicator separately. They



may be combined into an overall score for the pasture unit or left as an individual score and compared with the other nine indicators. Indicators receiving the lowest scores can be targeted for corrective action as warranted. The plant vigor indicator is broken down further into six possible causes that affect plant vigor. As one or more erosion indicators may exist on a site, they are split into four types: sheet and rill, gully, stream bank or shoreline, and wind.

The map shows the RI landowners who currently have pasture based projects to improve resources on their land. These conservation

practices could include: Pasture and hayland planting, watering facilities, pipeline for water distribution, prescribed grazing, nutrient and pest management plans on pasture, animal trails and walkways, and fencing, and brush management for invasive.

Lower Narragansett Bay Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program Grassland Restoration Projects Support Declining Avian Species *by Suzanne Enser, Biologist*

The loss of native grasslands has resulted in the decline of bird species that breed in these early successional habitats. To offset these losses, NRCS has initiated restoration activities via the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, the goal of which is to improve breeding opportunities for populations of grassland birds.

Evidence suggests that naturally occurring grasslands existed along the East Coast well before colonization (Askins 1999)¹, and thus may have been more wide spread, though naturally restricted, along the coast of Rhode Island. These areas have, however, been severely reduced in area by development and the proliferation of invasive species. While few naturally occurring grassland habitats presently exist in Rhode Island, agricultural hayfields and grazing lands provide unique habitats that support a distinct assemblage of grassland birds (RIDEM 2005).²

Avondale Farm Preserve (Westerly) and Norman Bird Sanctuary (Middletown) present opportunities to restore areas that were once part of the naturally occurring continuum of grasslands in Rhode Island, thus having the potential to support grassland-breeding birds. Lawton Farm (Scituate), while not located along the coast, has been farmed

¹ Askins, R. A. 1999. History of grassland birds in eastern North America. *Studies in Avian Biology* 19:60-71

² RI's comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy. RI Dept. of Environmental Management



since the 1800's. With technical and financial assistance from NRCS, the Westerly Land Trust, Norman Bird Sanctuary, and Scituate Land Trust initiated restoration activities to control non-native invasive species and increase the amount of viable grassland habitat.

Two species of obligate grassland nesting birds that were abundant during the peak of agriculture in RI are the eastern meadowlark and bobolink (Enser 1992)³. Both require large tracts of grassland habitat during the breeding season for courtship, nesting, foraging, rearing young, and roosting or resting. Since restoration activities were begun in 2004, eastern meadowlarks have successfully bred at Avondale Farm Preserve, bobolinks at Norman Bird Sanctuary, and both species have been observed during the breeding season at Lawton Farm.

Economics - Happenings

by Reena Shaw, Economist

The FY 2007 cost list for the EQIP and WHIP Farm Bill Programs is currently available to the public on the Rhode Island NRCS website. Staff members have until February 5, 2007 to submit requests for changes to the cost list, which may include changes in costs, units listed, additional components, deletion of components. Supporting documentation for all requested changes to the cost must accompany the requests in order of them to be considered. The State Conservationist will make the final decision regarding changes to the FY 2007 cost list.

Cultural Resources - Happenings

by Reena Shaw, Economist

The Cultural Resources Coordinator (CRC) has successfully coordinated with the RI State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO)/RIHPHC, and the Advisory Council of Historic Preservation (ACHP) with regard to two river restoration projects located at the Dyerville Dam and at the Rising Sun Dam along the Woonasquatucket River, Providence. As explained in the prior report, a Phase 1(c) Cultural Resource Survey resulted in a finding of Adverse Impact was issued.

This finding requires a Memorandum of Agreement between NRCS and SHPO/RIHPHC regarding mitigation actions that need to be taken to offset any loss in cultural resources that may result from the proposed project. Our office has conferred with both SHPO/RIHPHC and ACHP and a Memorandum of Agreement has been approved by all parties and signed by NRCS and SHPO/RIHPHC.

NEPA - Environmental Assessment Flow Diagrams

by Reena Shaw, Economist

The State Economist continues to work with representatives from the

³ Enser, R. 1992. The atlas of breeding birds in RI. RI Department of Environmental Management



other New England States and staff from the ENTSC to complete Environmental Assessment (EA) flow diagrams to meet NEPA requirements. The first draft of the complete EA is completed.

An email was sent to the State Technical Team that provided links to the draft EA and instructions for providing comments. The representatives from all the New England States will discuss comments to the draft EA during a teleconference in February. Once all of the comments have been considered and addressed, as appropriate, the EA will be finalized and a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) will be submitted to the State Conservationists of all the participating states for signatures. Once all the State Conservationists have signed the FONSI, a Notice of Application will be published in the Federal Register.

Biological Sciences - Happenings

by Andrew Lipsky, State Biologist

No update for this edition



Ecological Sciences - Update

by J. Eric Scherer, State Resource Conservationist
Field Office Technical Guide

No update for this edition

Engineering - Update

by Frank Vogel, Assistant State Engineer
Pocasset Floodplain Management Study (FPMS)



Review of the final draft was received and approved by the State Conservation Engineer. Incorporation of final comments is ongoing. The National Water Management Center (NWMC) in Arkansas is also providing final review comments prior to publication. We are coordinating with Senator Jack Reed's office to schedule the date of the public meeting for the presentation of the Flood Plain Management Study. The publication of the final report will be distributed the week following this public meeting. Future work: GZA Environmental has drawn up 30% designs for work at selected critical flooding areas for floodwalls, flood proofing and storm water modifications that will be part of the Pocasset Watershed Plan.

Engineering Services

Correction: In the previous Activity Report it was inadvertently stated, that Fuss O'Neill Engineering was providing the design, permitting and construction services for fish passage projects on the Woonasquatucket River. These services are being provided by EA Science and Engineering.

Grazing Land Conservation Initiative (GLCI)

by Michael Merrill, GLCI Coordinator

Rhode Island was represented at the Third National Conference on Grazing Lands in St. Louis MO with the title of **"Grazinglands,**





Gateway to Success". Tom Sandham, Eastern RI Conservation District Manager, attended the conference as part of a GLCI agreement. Also, Michael Merrill, the current GLCI coordinator attended. There were close to 2,000 attendees in St. Louis from all over the country. There were many great lectures, workshops and exhibitors from many states. It was an opportunity to meet with and discuss East regional issues, and to meet with colleagues from Massachusetts and Connecticut. In addition, to find out what bordering states are providing to landowners and partners as it relates to grazing and pasture management.

Presentations were given that focused on building partnerships between agricultural, grazing and urban communities; successful cutting-edge management technologies for grazing practices; economic, marketing and public policy implications of grazing; and optimizing grazing land health for environmental and social benefits.

Also, in the last months, many new applicants for EQIP Conservation Plans have pasture for which planners are assisting landowners to identify resource concerns and potential conservation practices. We continue to assist landowners in implementing conservation practices on pastureland.

Earth Team Volunteer Program - Update

by Jeanne Comerford, State Volunteer Program Coordinator

No update for this edition

Farm Bill Programs - Update

by Joseph Bachand, Resource Conservationist, and Reena Shaw, Acting EQIP Program Manager

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

All planners are busy developing information and creating conservation plans for the upcoming ranking to be completed on February 15, 2007. All projects will be pre-approved by March 15 2007. All pre-approved applicants will work with their planners to develop the final conservation plans and conservation contracts. All contracts will need to be signed and approved by June 1, 2007.

WHIP Featured Projects

This quarter's featured projects are the Mussachuck Creek Estuary Restoration Project and the Kickemuit Fish Ladder.

Mussachuck Creek Estuary Restoration Project: This project located in the Town of Barrington began in 1998. A highly complex project, when completed will result in the restoration of over 150 acres of anadromous fish spawning habitat and 20 acres of coastal salt marsh. Many partners have been involved with the project including Save the Bay, RI CRMC, RI DOT, RI DEM, Fish America, NOAA and Army Corps of Engineers. Not to be left out, our primary partner, the RI Country Club, who has spent significant time and money to make this project a reality. Look for the *"Grand Opening Celebration"* in Spring 2007!



Kickemuit Fish Ladder: NRCS began working on this project in 2002 with the Bristol County Water Authority. Bristol County Water Authority donated numerous hours of staff time for the planning, design and installation of the fish ladder. Completion of the project will help restore anadromous fish passage to the Kickemuit and help to restore in excess of 40 acres of spawning habitat. Many partners worked on the project and provided funding including: The RI DEM, RI CRMC, Save the Bay, NOAA, Narragansett Bay Estuary Program, USEPA, PG&E Energy, Blount Industries, RI Salt Water Anglers and the Kickemuit River Watershed Association.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The application period for the FY 2007 EQIP Program closed on December 1, 2007. NRCS RI received 50 applications for a variety of projects throughout the state. Ranking will be completed by February 15, 2007. By March 15, 2007, all eligible contracts will be pre-approved or approved in the Protracts contracting system. All funds will be obligated in Protracts by June 1, 2007.

Wetland Reserve Program

NRCS is working on a strategy to utilize the Wetland Reserve Program funding in Rhode Island. We are developing a *"WRP Riparian Area Action Plan"*. Current WRP rules allow NRCS to use WRP to purchase easements areas that fall under the following:

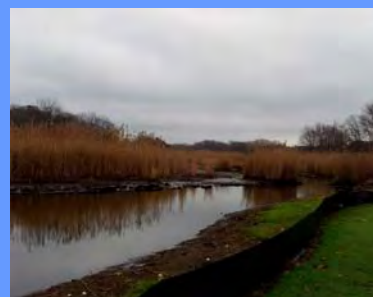
Riparian areas along streams or other waterways are eligible providing the area:

- establishes a link between:
- wetlands protected by an easement, or wetlands protected by an interest that achieves the same purpose as an easement such as State or Federal wildlife management area.

It is our hope that we can find numerous opportunities in Rhode Island to use WRP on these riparian areas. We will be piloting this WRP project in several areas in Rhode Island during FY2007.

Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program

One closing took place in January. Development rights were purchased on the Middle Acres Farm in Tiverton. The Agricultural Land Preservation Commission will hold the deed to the development rights on about 90 acres of the property. Lucien Lebreux, the property owner will continue to farm the land.



Operations

by Jackie Pashnik, Management Analyst

Personnel Actions

- Michael Moorman has been selected as the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, effective 3/4/2007



Performance Update

by Jackie Pashnik, Management Analyst

Rhode Island NRCS Performance Measures as of January 30, 2007	Program	Goal	Progress
Conservation plans written, acres	CTA	3400	356
	CTA-GLCI	100	0
Watershed or area-wide conservation plans developed, number	CTA	1	0
	RC&D	4	0
	PL-06	1	0
Soil surveys mapped or updated, acres	SOILS	5,000	0
Cropland with conservation applied to improve soil quality, acres	AMA	20	26
	CTA	300	48
	EQIP	700	31
Land with conservation applied to improve water quality, acres	CTA	1400	29
	CTA-GLCI	100	0
	CRP	10	0
	EQIP	500	108
	WRP	500	74
CNMP written, number	EQIP	9	0
CNMP applied, number	EQIP	7	0
Land with conservation applied to improve irrigation efficiency, acres	AMA	20	0
	CTA	100	0
	EQIP	150	5
Grazing and forest land with conservation applied to protect and improve the resource base, acres	CTA	400	2
	CTA-GLCI	200	0
	EQIP	300	209
Non-federal land with conservation applied to improve fish and wildlife habitat quality, acres	CTA	300	0
	EQIP	500	0
	GRP	20	0
	WHIP	1,000	1,102
Wetlands created, restored or enhanced, acres	CTA	100	0
	WRP	30	0
Farmland, forestland, and grazing lands protected by conservation easements, acres	FRPP	219	0
	GRP	12	0
Prime, unique, or important farmland protected by conservation easements, acres	FRPP	109	0
Land and water resources benefited by RC&D projects, acres	RC&D	2,000	0
Local businesses created in rural communities, number	RC&D	2	0



Training, Conferences, and Meetings - update

by Jackie Pashnik, Management Analyst

- All Staff Team Building at award's day in January
- Nineteen members of the staff completed OSHA training.

Outreach and Communications-Happenings

by Jeanne Comerford, State Public Affairs Specialist



Event	Date	Attendees
RC&D Open House	12/6/2006	50
Rural Fire Protection Workshops (4)	January 2007	16

Soils Program - Happenings

by Jim Turenne, Assistant State Soil Scientist

Thanks to the warm weather during December, the MapCoast field team has been continuing collecting soil cores and other data in Greenwich Bay, Wickford Harbor, and Quonochontaug Pond. The cores will be logged and sampled in the laboratory during the winter months. The soils staff also submitted a proposal for a new "Official Soil Series" for subaqueous soils that are mapped in low energy basins in coastal lagoons. The soil is named the Pishagqua series, which is the Algonquin term for mud, which is what the Pishagqua soil feels like if you were to squeeze a sample. The series description is currently under review, once approved it will be listed as a tentative soil series and posted on the web.



Jim Doolittle, research soil scientist with the National Soil Survey Laboratory in Lincoln Nebraska, spent a week in Rhode Island conducting ground-penetrating radar (GPR) and electromagnetic induction (EMI) surveys to collect remote sensing data on our soils. Jim also provided training to the soil staff in the southern New England region on a new EMI 38 unit that will be housed here in Rhode Island and used for soil investigations throughout the Northeast. The EMI measures ground conductivity of the soil profile to a depth of 2 meters. The EMI is used to map the depth to various soil features such as bedrock, peat thickness, salt water, and other soil properties, it is also used for archaeological investigations and engineering applications.



Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D)

by Chris Modisette, RC&D Coordinator

Rhody Warm Project

- Produced 250 blankets
- We held an open house to announce the release of the blanket on December 6, 2006. Approximately 50 people attended the event which featured remarks by DEM Director Michael Sullivan;
- To date we have sold 200 blankets
- NRCS awarded the RI Sheep Cooperative with a *Conservation Partner Award* for their work on the blanket with the RC&D Council and NRCS
- Planning has started for the 2007 blanket
- East Bay Living Magazine is planning to do a feature article on the blanket for the Oct/Nov. edition of their magazine. The magazine will follow a sheep farmer through the process during the course of the year.
- We are working a press event with the Governor for February 2007
- The project has attracted the attention of the state's alpaca farmers who met with the Coop members to discuss opportunities for collaboration
- Coggeshall Farm in Bristol has invited Rhody Warm Project to assist with the development of a RI Fiber Festival to be held in May 2007

Rural Fire Protection

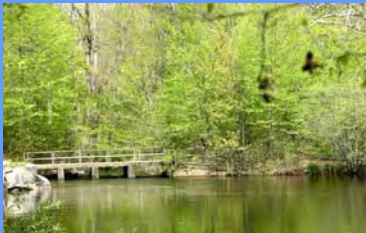
Working with representatives from the RI Division of Forest Environment we:

- Developed a fact sheet for the program
- Developed a PowerPoint presentation on the project
- Developed application packages for dry-hydrants
- Held four (4) meetings across the state to promote the project. Representatives from 16 fire departments attended the meetings.
- Received applications for 19 dry-hydrants
- Additional 2007 plans include:
 - Chainsaw training for firefighters; and
 - Conduct of a statement assessment of need for future dry-hydrants

Forest Land Enhancement Program (FLEP)

RI RC&D continues to encourage forest management actions to promote and conserve wildlife habitats by providing administrative support for the FLEP program partnership between RI RC&D and RIDEM.

In December 2006 and nine (9) landowners owning 734 acres received \$6,534.00 of cost-share assistance for the preparation of forest stewardship plans.





Rhode Island Stream Continuity Project

- Prepared WHIP application packages for high priority projects in project area and distributed to the communities of Exeter, Hopkinton, Richmond, and West Greenwich.
- Received three (3) applications for project consideration under the WHIP Program for 2007

RI Blueways Project

The RC&D Council met with Meg Kerr from the RI Blueways Project to discuss areas of collaboration between the two (2) groups. The purpose of the Blueways Project is to create a statewide network of paddling trails, from freshwater streams and ponds, to estuaries and the open ocean. The project hopes to define paddling trails with clear information for paddlers, convenient access sites and portages and will promote the conservation of land and water through which they travel. The Council agreed to work the project to help restore access sites identified by the project as important to the Blueway effort.

New England RC&D Annual Fall Conference

RI RC&D will be hosting the New England RC&D Council Fall Conference, October 17-20, 2007 at the Village Inn in Narragansett, RI. The conference theme is *Sustaining a Sense of Place through Conservation Partnerships*.



Upcoming Events & Deadlines

by Jeanne Comerford, State Public Affairs Specialist

Direct Marketing Conference And Trade Show

The New England Farmers' Direct Marketing Conference and Trade Show, February 28 - March 1, 2007, sponsored by the New England State Departments of Agriculture and partners. Additional information at www.harvestnewengland.org, or contact Stephen Volpe, RIDEM, Deputy Chief, 222-2781 ext. 4501, or stephen.volpe@dem.ri.gov.

Land & Water Conservation Summit, March 24, 2007, URI, sponsored by The RI Rivers Council.

RI NRCS Cultural Diversity Day, March 28, 2007 .Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA